

CHAPTER VII

LITTLE MARY'S STORY

TWO or three weeks rushed by, and Mary came in with a laughing face, drenching the ugly city with a new beauty.

Old Silver tried hard to get an engagement whenever he could. But the season was not propitious. In a great many managers' offices, where high-handed office-boys acted like little czars, his name was unfamiliar—one might even say unknown; and he always felt that it was a waste of time to send in his card. He was "old-fashioned." He belonged to a previous generation, a sadly distant era.

Barrow told him not to worry—at least, he would always be certain of a roof over his white head, and good meals to eat. But just as an old fire-horse with some spirit left in him chafes in his stall when there is no drama of disaster, so Oliver Silver felt like kicking over the traces in his box of a room. To be in the world, and yet not of it—that was his tragedy.

Little Mary's Story

One of his few joys now was to lunch frequently in the grill, for there he saw Mary. And after the noontime rush she could be found at the cigar stand in the lobby, while her friend Annie dispensed theatre tickets from behind the same counter. He had come to know Annie too; for the girls were great friends. And he liked Annie, with her clear young eyes and sunny hair, because she liked Mary—a regular merry-go-round of friendship, he called it.

There was a young man, well dressed, rather delicate looking, tall and pale, whom he now began to notice day after day, sitting in the lobby not far from the cigar stand. He could not exactly explain why the appearance of this young fellow attracted him, and yet it certainly did, somehow. There he always seemed to be between about the hours of six and seven, just sitting reading a newspaper and smoking, and—watching. Yes, he observed his every movement, his lack of interest in the columns he pretended to be so assiduously reading; and he was sure he was watching for little Mary; for when she was absent he wore a constrained look. The constant pageant of other folk did not seem to interest him at all. His attention was always focussed on the cigar stand.

Old 931 began to speculate about him. Why

The Actor in Room 931

was he always there, at that particular time? Was he stopping at the hotel, or was he a stranger who drifted in, one of the many in the neighbourhood who liked a glimpse of the life here? Or was he, perhaps, a detective?—a “plain-clothes man,” as they said in America.

On a certain evening, Silver saw him move more swiftly to the cigar counter when Mary chanced to be alone on duty. He bought some cigarettes, smiled into Mary's eyes, and then tore open the package with great deliberation, more deliberately lighted one, then puffed at it, the while crossing his legs as though he intended to stay as long as he could in the radiant presence of the girl. Silver could see the smoke curling upward, and another cigarette lighted as quickly as the first one was finished; and even a third indulged in. He would lean forward, between puffs, and chat glibly or casually, as his mood suited him. The old actor could not say why, but he did not quite like the young man's appearance, though there was little in it to suggest anything but a pseudo-gentleman. Probably a harmless enough fellow, he thought; and maybe he was doing him a great injustice to suspect him of any ulterior motive.

Once in a while Silver would himself move casually to the counter, say “Good evening,

Little Mary's Story

little Mary," and pretend to be looking over the wares that were so carefully placed under the glass covering, each labelled, like the guests, ticketed, tucked in its proper place. Everything in the world was thus accounted for, he ruminated—people and cigars; it mattered little.

He noticed that, when he came near, a silence fell over the young man. Out of the corner of the other's eye he knew that he was being taken in. Sometimes the fellow would go away; but Silver had the wit not to ask Mary about him—yet. Once he thought of speaking to Barrow about him; but why should he do so, and create a disturbance in the otherwise placid days of the Splendide? Then he thought of Erdleigh—this would be just the kind of intrigue Erdleigh would like to get in on; but poor Bob was always so confoundedly busy, and a suggestion whispered in his willing ear might cause him to neglect his regular work and start him on a new tack of suspicion which would lead to nothing. Better let things run along as they were for awhile. Old Silver was not a meddler. But he could not rid his mind of its own private ideas; and after all, Mary seemed perfectly able to look after herself. She was surrounded by people all the while, and nothing very serious could happen to her—here. He hoped, however, that the

The Actor in Room 931

mysterious young man did not talk to Mary on the well-worn subject of love! She was far too good for a fellow of his stamp.

One evening the young man was missing; and Silver took the opportunity to have a long chat with Mary. It was raining outside, and trade was slack. As her capable hands brought forth the Havanas he so liked, he spoke of them.

"Mighty nice hands, little Mary," he said. And of course there was nothing in the least flirtatious in Old Silver's remark! He had gone far beyond the Rubicon in that respect.

"Do you think so? They're so big! So very big, and rather clumsy now."

Yet he could see that she was flattered—as of course every girl is at a compliment.

"It isn't the size that matters—it's the shape," went on Silver. "And see how 'capable' they are at their work! Those hands—I'm sure they've done much."

"Indeed they have, dear friend. You see, father had a ranch down in Arizona, years ago—poor father. He'd separated from my mother when I was a mere child, and I used to divide my time between them—divorce is a cruel thing to children, isn't it, sir? I'd ride with the cowboys for a few months, and drink in that wonderful air—oh, what a thrill it gives me yet! Then

Little Mary's Story

I'd go back to mother, and make the rounds of the theatres, drinking in a different air. Yet I couldn't say which I liked more. Really I couldn't. I liked the smell of those open spaces, but I liked the smell of grease-paint too. Funny folks some of us are, aren't we?

"My hands grew big and strong—'capable,' you call them. But when one handles a broncking steed, it's necessary to hold him tight; and I certainly learned to ride and stick to my saddle! I was the idol of the boys out there. They used to call me 'the child wonder,' and all that—you can imagine how I was petted—yes, almost completely spoiled. It would be so easy to spoil one, out with men like that. Oh, they're wonderful, Mr. Silver. Have you ever been out in that country?"

He told her that he hadn't, except to play. He had never found time for the joys of ranching in his youth. It had been nothing but hard work for him.

"I've had a curious life, short as it has been so far," Mary ruminated aloud to the old man. "Some of it's been like a fairy story; and some of it's been—well, pretty tragic."

"Tell me anything you wish to," Silver said. "You must know how interested I am in all that concerns you."

The Actor in Room 931

And then she smiled and told him how she remembered a certain incident which changed the whole course of her existence. It seems that she was in her mother's dressing-room one night, while the latter was out on the stage; and to kill time, the child had stood in front of the long mirror, rising on her toes, as she had lately seen a ballet-dancer do, pirouetting, bowing, holding her arms above her head, throwing kisses to an imaginary audience. She thought she was alone; she had no idea she was being observed. But soon she heard a little whisper of "Bravo, my child!" and from behind a curtain an elderly man stepped. He was an old friend of her mother's, and chanced to be passing through that town; and as his train was not due for an hour or so, he had looked in at the theatre for a chat about the old days. He always made it a point to glance at a newspaper when he reached any city, to see what was playing at the theatres; and often he had the luck to find a name he knew billed at one of the play-houses. He counted himself particularly lucky this time.

"Hello, young lady! You do it well," he told the lithe dancer, as, astonished, she all but fell into his arms. "Who are you? Bless me," he added, looking into her dark eyes, "you must

Little Mary's Story

be Mary Monteith's daughter—you're the living image of her."

It seems that he was manager of a dancing troupe, and he was ever on the look out for beginners, hoping to mould them into shape. Mary smiled wistfully at the recollection of him. "You see," she told Silver, "I wish that what happened might never have happened; for he put a dream into my heart—a dream that now cannot be fulfilled."

"Why, my poor child, just what do you mean?"

"To make a long story short, he talked to my dear mother that night after the play, and begged her to allow me to study under him, and join his troupe. She gave her consent—oh, he was a gentleman, if ever there was one, and she knew she could trust him; and I was wild about dancing. I literally danced with joy when mother said yes, I could do it. I studied, I worked, I strove with all my might to make good; and I became a remarkably fine ballet-girl, if you'll believe it. Of course I had always danced since a child, and had stood on tiptoe unconsciously, loving to balance myself thus. But to be a great dancer one had to begin almost in the cradle. And so I knew that although I might never be A-Number-One, as they say, I

could at least make some sort of impression ; and, too, the money I earned would help tremendously. At the end of a year I was earning—I'd hate to tell you how much. It would seem unbelievable—that's where the fairy tales come in, you see ! But it didn't last long, that wave of prosperity and happiness.

“ Our troupe went to Canada one winter. Pavlova—the great Pavlova !—had seen me in Chicago, and had picked me out of the five principals, and sent for me afterwards, and praised me, and almost turned my poor little silly head—only no one could do that, you know. I'm just fooling, sir. Great hopes, though, were held out by the manager for me. He was the best friend ever, and how he did want me to succeed ! One would have thought I was his daughter.”

In Canada a dreadful thing happened. Mary was not able to get rooms near the theatre where the troupe was playing, and one night as she was coming home, walking, as it was a glorious moonlit evening, and she wanted the keen air to get into her lungs, she slipped and fell on the icy pavement. A heavy snow had fallen the day before, and there were huge banks on either side of her. She twisted her ankle—oh, the pain of it !—and there was no one in sight to

Little Mary's Story

give her assistance. She fainted, right there, of the exquisite torture that shot through her. She must have cried out in agony ; she didn't know that, of course ; but she did know that it was hours before anyone found her. She was carried, in desperate pain, to her lodgings, and most kindly helped to bed by the good landlady who had taken her to her heart from the first instant she had set eyes upon her.

" I'll never forget that night," Mary was telling Silver. " When old Mrs. McHenry had undressed me, she examined my poor toes ; and with a wild scream she left the room suddenly, just as if she'd been shot out of a cannon ! For she discovered what I had not known at all—that some of the toes on my right foot were frozen stiff—particularly the great one—the one, of course, that I pirouetted upon—and she had gone for a doctor. She knew it meant the ruin of my career ; hence her scream of terror and despair. Such a dear, good, motherly woman as she was ! "

" Well, the doctor came at once. Yes, it was even as Mrs. McHenry had feared. A severe case of frozen foot. The doctor was young, but he knew ; and he looked pityingly at the child. " Shall I tell you the sad truth ? " he asked her. " It will be many and many a long day before

you can dance again," he said, when she had nodded an affirmative.

She almost broke down then; but not quite. It would never do for a Monteith to fail in a crisis. What was, was. A pity. A tragedy. But how could it have been avoided? She must grin and bear it, hard though it might be to remain a philosopher through the trying weeks that were to follow.

But she kept up her courage. Finally, she got down to Arizona, to her father's ranch. "And oh," she told him, "the cowboys were so good to me—so glad to see me again. Why, do you know, they almost blessed the accident, because they said it had brought me back to them!" And a little tear came on her cheek. "Such boys! I'll never see their like again, I'm afraid." She looked off, over the commonplace cigar counter, to the corridor where a few stragglers sat reading their papers. And Old Silver thought how those same lovely eyes had looked at far spaces, back in that God's country. Tragic indeed that she must now be here, hemmed in—she who had been so free. •

"I'm afraid I wasn't much good back at the ranch," she went on, after a pause. "I used crutches at first; and crutches make one feel so much of an invalid; and they make others

Little Mary's Story

pity you—which is dreadful. And I'd always been such an active, robust girl. I could see the looks in the boys' eyes as they glanced my way. I had to throw away those crutches after a few weeks—they made me nervous. I'd manage somehow, I said to myself. And I did. I don't know just how. Maybe it was the power of mind over matter. The fact remains, though, that I got well speedily; but no more dancing for little Mary! Oh, no! I simply stayed on, to get my strength back. I fed the stock, and I did lots of housework, and I knitted socks for the boys, and listened to all their troubles. Great days, those, now that I come to look back on them. It's wonderful to forget yourself, and to realize that the other fellow's burden may be a little harder to bear than your own."

"But surely yours was hard enough!" exclaimed Silver, into whose pale old eyes the tears had come, as he listened to this recital, so simply told. He felt that Mary could have been an actress—actress of the modern school, so natural was the unconscious art with which she related her narrative.

"No. There could be many harder things to bear than my disappointment over a spoiled career. Besides, you must remember that I never thought myself a *great* dancer. I was just

The Actor in Room 931

one of many, you know. My place had been filled—there's always some one coming over the top of the hill to take the places of those who disappear. It's so in any profession, don't you think so?"

And then she wished she hadn't said it—to Oliver Silver, of all people!

"Oh, I don't mean . . ." But it was too late to explain. Better to keep quiet.

Silver blushed; and was that a fresh tear on his eyelid?

"I understand, my child. But it's so difficult to know when one is supposed to disappear in the scheme of things—so very difficult. We like to feel, no matter how the years pursue us, that we're in the racing yet. You haven't hurt me, child. You merely said what the whole world is for ever saying; and it's good for us old fogies to come to a realization, sometimes, of the passionate flight of time. You see, you're so young—you don't know that we old fellows still look upon ourselves as very much in the picture! It's curious; but I'm just as excited about life as I ever was. So excited, that I want you to go on with your story. What next did you do? Tell me, child."

"Father took sick," Mary immediately began again, glad that she had not hurt the old man.

Little Mary's Story

“Our troubles crowd upon us, don't they? He—died—in my arms. I was happy only in the thought that I was strong enough to hold him. But he'd grown, oh, so thin, and it wasn't much effort after all. Then the ranch had to be sold. The boys were wonderful to me again. They offered to pool the whole property, and give me my share. They said they'd work for me, make me their little queen. But of course I couldn't let them do that. You must remember that a girl is very popular out there, where there are twenty-five men to one woman. Funny how girls stay in this awful city—I don't know what the lure of it can be—when they might be out in those wonderful wind-swept places, with air like wine, and men like little gods! Even I felt that I must get away.”

“Where did you go?”

“Back to Canada—of all places. You would have thought I'd never want to see it again, after what had happened to me there; but I was better by this time, though my condition didn't make it possible for me to walk without a limp. Moreover, I longed to see Mrs. McHenry, who had been so good to me. My own mother was playing in Australia, and I couldn't visit her. That dear old Mrs. McHenry became my adviser, my confidante, and my dearest friend.

The Actor in Room 931

I don't know what I'd have done without her. She had some friends in Montreal, and she wrote them. They were interested in an hotel, and I got a job, through her good offices, as a manicure there. I didn't like it. It's no fun sitting in a barber's shop all day, waiting for some one to speak to you; and then when he does, to be insulted! Besides, I wasn't a very good manicure. I felt I didn't know my trade well enough; and that was my excuse for leaving—handing in my resignation would sound more important and dignified, wouldn't it?"

Silver laughed. "Well, you're a great little philosopher, anyhow, I must say. You took all your troubles easily—they seem to have rolled off you; but I can see that they've left their marks. It's all right to shout and sing for a while; but one can't always be a saint, can one? I remember a lad once who lost his left hand in the War; and a 'glad' lady said to him, 'Well, anyhow, you must be consoled because it's your left hand.' Whereupon he answered, 'I would be, only I happen to be left-handed, ma'am.'"

That made them both laugh; and it relieved the tension of little Mary's really bleak story.

"I got into Macy's; and now I'm here—all that I've told you before. Besides, you can't

Little Mary's Story

help knowing I'm here, can you? You see enough of me, heaven knows!"

"I couldn't see enough, little Mary," answered the old man. "Thank you for telling me what you have. It's opened my eyes to many things. Do any of your old friends from the West ever come here, and do you see them?"

"Oh, yes," Mary answered quickly. "That's one thing that makes it so nice to have a sort of semi-public position—you can see everybody, and everybody can see you! I do like it here."

Silver paused, before he turned away. He didn't know whether he should say it or not; but finally he ventured to ask:

"I suppose that thin, tall young fellow I see in the corridor so often is one of your old Western friends?"

"Oh, no! I've noticed him, too—how could I help it? He just lounges in, and sits and stares. I'm sure it's at the counter and not at me, really! I've watched the angle of his eyes, and so has Annie; and we're convinced he gives little thought to us. There are plenty of nuts like him in the world. We get to know them, and to understand them. He's spoken to me several times; but he's never tried to become too intimate. When you saw him awhile ago—that was the longest he'd ever talked to me.

The Actor in Room 931

And he went away as soon as you came along. I think he's shy. Besides, maybe he knew who you were—everybody does, sir. He's the kind who'd be scared to death of a celebrity!"

"You don't honestly think of an old has-been like me as a 'celebrity,' do you, little Mary? Why, I haven't been before the public for years."

"You'd be surprised how many speak to me about you, Mr. Silver."

"Bless your heart," he said. He was always touched when anyone thought of him. To be forgotten—that was life's supreme tragedy. Might as well let the curtain rustle down then. The show would indeed be over.